

Ecclesiastes Resumed (Part One)

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We are going to go back into the book of Ecclesiastes again.

In the early 1960s I was in Spokesman's Club in the Pittsburgh congregation, and I heard a speech given by a man in the same club. He was a high school principal and later became an elder in the Worldwide Church of God. His speech subject was, "How to Read a Book." It never dawned on me before that there was a procedure which I could follow that might be helpful to extract more from the book. It was only one suggestion I remember, but I believe that it was a good one. He said, "Never read a book without first reading and grasping the preface." Why? Because in the preface, the author usually tells why he wrote the book, and it often reveals his specific purpose statement.

I believe that I pretty much overlooked that when we originally began going through the book of Ecclesiastes, and I think we are going to do that today. We are going to look into the preface for the book of Ecclesiastes, and there is a considerable amount there which I think will help you to understand the book as a whole. So we are going to go back into the book of Ecclesiastes after setting it aside for the Feast of Tabernacles and to finish what I consider to be loose ends of sermons I began at the Feast but did not get finished with there.

In the meantime I have been able to do more research into Ecclesiastes, and I think that what I have extracted from it will be helpful for you to understand it better. I have concluded that the first chapter, and especially the first eleven verses of that first chapter, comes fairly close to being the preface of Ecclesiastes. The first chapter provides foundational material that guides us to a clearer understanding of the remainder of the book.

I mentioned to you fairly recently during a sermon that Ecclesiastes is a difficult book to grasp, and since the Feast I have learned that very many commentators in the world feel that way too, and I believe that I have discovered a number of reasons why. It is because there are so many questions concerning the writing that clearly remain unanswered, because the writing does not firmly fit into the prejudices and preconceptions of the commentators, and not the least of which is, according to them, "the book of Ecclesiastes does not preach Christ." That is rather ironic to me because He authored it in the first place.

Regarding the message, they cannot seem to decide whether the message is pessimistic or positive. Most of them tend to feel that it is pessimistic, and in one sense I do too, but you have got to understand what I mean when I say that I believe that it is pessimistic. There is a cause for that. Another reason they have difficulty with it is that there are some indications that Solomon did not author it, and it may have been written, according to them, as late as the third century BC rather than 950 years *before* Christ when Solomon literally lived and reigned.

The commentators seem to have no problem whatever with knowing, believing, and teaching that Solomon authored Proverbs, but Ecclesiastes is another matter altogether. That is not going to worry me at all, and it does not worry me because I see that God is on His throne, overseeing all, and He deems this writing worthy to be in the Bible, and more importantly, I believe that He is the real author anyway.

I will refer to the author many times as I go through this. Sometimes I will call him the teacher. Sometimes I will call him the preacher. Sometimes I call him Solomon because I believe personally that Solomon really did write it. I think that is hard to just set aside when it is something that has been carried through time for so long and so strongly and so frequently repeated that modern commentators to me do not come up to snuff with their analysis of this.

Ecclesiastes was titled by the translators who produced the Septuagint Bible. Actually, that is not quite accurate, but it is pretty close. The Septuagint Bible is a Greek translation of the original Hebrew text, and Ecclesiastes means “one who speaks in an assembly, and therefore a teacher or a preacher.” The word Ecclesiastes is drawn from the word *ecclesia*. Everybody knows from the New Testament that *ecclesia* is the word that has been translated into “church,” but even that is one that has a twisted history to it because *ecclesia* actually means “assembly.” Through the centuries it became mixed with the word “church” through some English and some Scottish people who applied the word “kirk” to *ecclesia*. That is why they call this person the teacher, or the preacher, or Solomon. He did that kind of thing.

Now, what does Ecclesiastes say to the Christian? Very, very much. A great deal. In fact I personally believe (and this is of course subjective, one person to another) that in many ways it fills a role that makes it overall, for everyday life, the most practical and valuable book in the Old Testament. It does this by providing overviews that give the Christian excellent advice, and this advice is on common circumstances that we face virtually every day of our life, and we need this kind of advice in order to guide our life in the right direction.

The life of a Christian pilgrim is described by any number of commentators writing on Ecclesiastes as being much like a labyrinth constructed of very high hedges, and once you get inside the labyrinth you cannot see over the hedges, so you are constantly running into blocked paths, and you have to backtrack and go in another direction in order to find the correct way through there.

So finding a path through life is difficult. It is like a labyrinth, but if you were positioned *above* the labyrinth looking down on it, the path will be much easier to be able to find.

Ecclesiastes is labeled by its followers as “wisdom literature.” It contains a very large treasury of general analyses of those areas of life most important to getting guidance about making choices regarding which paths in life are most worthwhile and which are a waste of time and energy, and therefore profitless to follow. If we are close to the book of Ecclesiastes, and we understand what is there, we are going to make a lot fewer mistakes if we are willing to follow it. This is where its value lies.

As the teacher-preacher Solomon wrote these analyses, they are not detailed, but at the same time the teacher’s conclusions are clearly and sometimes bluntly stated so that it is hard not to get the overall point even though we may not fully grasp or understand the illustrations used in the analyses.

Let us look at a circumstance every one of us who is a Christian is in. We are going to go back to the New Testament to I Corinthians 13—the Love Chapter. We are only going to look at verse 12—one of the more famous statements that the apostle Paul made.

I Corinthians 13:12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then [meaning after the resurrection] face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

I am going to give you a translation of that verse from the *Revised English Bible*, and it goes like this: “At present we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror, but one day we shall see face to face. My knowledge is now partial [we do not see the whole picture]; then it will be whole, like God’s knowledge of me.”

In this, Paul touches on one of life’s difficulties. Having a clear grasp of what is going on is very difficult in this very confusing world. There is so much going on, and so much of it is painful to think about, and it is wearying, and so much is happening, impacting on our mind through our eyes and our ears every single day.

I want you to grasp a reality that I think you are aware of. In an overall sense Christianity is a way of life that is almost always looking forward in time—that is, ahead to the future. Oh! We would like so much to get this over with. What is driving that? Well, the combination of what you know you are in right now, and what you have read and believed and heard preached to you, is coming in the future, and so that forces us to look forward in time because we want to get out of what we are in and into something that will not only be a tremendous relief, but very, very valuable.

So really, where that picture of what is ahead that provides the motivation is being extracted from the gospel of Jesus Christ, and of all things that impact on what the gospel is; thus God has willed that we must live by faith, not knowing all the answers.

So by faith we must live in a confusing world without a crystal-clear answer to many things in life, but choices about doing with our life what must be done. They must be made, not having all the facts. Now God knows this. Paul knew it, and so do you and I. How much do you know that you do without having all the facts? An awful lot, brethren.

That is what Paul was expressing in that verse. He did not have all the answers either. The only one who did was Jesus Christ, but there is something He did not know either. He did not know when He is coming back. So even He was in a bit of lack of knowledge with that. However, this is where Ecclesiastes begins to become helpful.

Ecclesiastes is a writing that is practical in daily application, and it focuses on life the way it is right now. It is not really looking ahead. When I say “not really,” we know of course that everything in the Bible is looking forward to the Kingdom of God, but Ecclesiastes does not concentrate on that. It is a writing for the “now,” and it is written in such a way that it applies from the time that it was written right up to today and beyond the things that are contained within. It has been giving advice to Christian people ever since it was put into the Book and made part of the things we need to learn.

So it reflects much on what we have to deal with on a daily basis. It does this in its unique way. It shows us how weak and insignificant we are in the face of the many mysterious operations of all that is going on around us, especially since we may be totally unaware. Now we are not totally unaware, but there are an awful lot of people who *are* totally unaware that God Himself is manipulating events. But these are things that we do not know because He knows where He is taking our life.

Like I told you at the beginning, in 1962 I had no idea that I would be doing what I am doing right now, but God knew, and so He put me through the paces I needed to be

able to speak before you right now here in the suburbs of Cleburne and other places as well, and He made the preparations so that I would be here to do this when He wanted me to be here and doing this. But I did not know it. This is what I mean. We do not have a clear picture of where God is taking us, and even though we know in principle that God is manipulating things in our life, we do not know exactly where He is headed. This is where the faith comes in.

Do you trust Him? Do you trust Him to submit even though you do not know? You only know a little bit, a dim reflection of where we are headed. Again, this is where the book of Ecclesiastes comes in and fills in some of the gaps. Not all of them, but it fills in enough so that it ought to reassure us that God is heading in a place with our life that is good, and what is happening right now, we need it for what He is preparing us for. It may seem at times as though life is moving awfully slow, but God has everything timed. Do we trust Him to bring us to the place where He wants us to be in His Kingdom, fulfilling a position that He has prepared us for?

Let us go to another New Testament scripture. Remember, these things fit into the book of Ecclesiastes. It is kind of background, filling in details you need to have in your mind so that you understand what Ecclesiastes is teaching a Christian.

I John 2:15-17 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

Human nature is drawn to the world like iron and steel to a magnet. Iron and steel wants to stay attached to the magnet. In us, it is human nature attracted to the magnet. The world is the magnet. Human nature wants to stay attached to the world the way iron and steel does to the magnet. You get the picture. There is a burden on us to always be pulled in that direction, and we have to discipline ourselves, control ourselves to keep that from happening.

Human nature finds the world attractive and appealing, and it is at home there, and it finds the world both comforting and exciting, and desires to participate in it. However, we know that the world is Satan's creation, and its ways of life are devoted to thwarting and destroying, if possible, God Himself, God's purpose, man, and if possible, even God's physical creation as well.

On the other hand, Ecclesiastes is devoted to *exposing* the world's false appeals for what they truly are: vanity of vanities. The book of Ecclesiastes is a picturesque attack on the acquisitive, hedonistic, materialistic flow of everything in the world. It exposes the mad quest for human nature to find satisfaction in knowledge—in other words, we get smarter and smarter and have more and more in our brains—wealth, pleasure, work, fame, entertainment, and sex. They are all addressed in Ecclesiastes, and that is what human nature is drawn toward the way that it is presented by the world.

Understand that none of these things is inherently evil; however, human nature cannot seem to find the right balance to control all of them and arrive at right balance in life. In addition, we cannot look ahead and see, at least clearly, even the immediate future for the times that we live in. The world is an almost relentless exposure of the erroneous belief that through free moral agency we are totally free to becoming whatever we desire. Not so. God is the Creator.

If we are one of His children, He is going to determine what we become. He does not leave our creation up to us. This is why He manipulates events in our life so that what He, the Creator, wants is produced in you and me. We can aid this creative process a great deal, or we can fight it.

Again, we get back to the book of Ecclesiastes. It helps us put things in the right position, in the right place. It does not point exactly to the right place, it just gives us a general overview of how we ought to fit ourselves in to what God is doing. Most especially, Solomon is saying, "Avoid this. Stay away from it. I tried it myself, and it doesn't work. It is vanity." So if we are wise, and we take advice from Solomon, we will do what he says because God put *him* through the paces too, and one of the outcomes was what he wrote in this book so that all of us can benefit from it. For thousands of years, people have been getting the benefit of Solomon's experiences, and the inspiration that God gave him to write what he did.

For the past number of weeks I have mentioned in my sermons the wisdom of God, picking it up from Proverbs 1, around verses 6 and 7; but the wisdom of God is the fruit of what is produced. It is the fruit of practical experience within a relationship with God. Without the relationship, we do not develop that wisdom. We might have human common sense, and that is good too, but it is nowhere near as good as the wisdom of God. The wisdom of God is right all the time, and the common sense of man is a hit-and-miss proposition because of the source, that is, man. God wants us to have this wisdom, and the aim of this is to teach the sons of God how to act in harmony within God's purpose for us despite all the confusing movement going on all around us. We will get to that movement bit in just a little while.

Ecclesiastes does not deal with the mighty acts of God. He does not split the sea anywhere in the book of Ecclesiastes. This is down-to-earth stuff—knowledge, understanding that we can use all of the time. Ecclesiastes does not deal with the matter of redemption. Part of the reason is, because when Solomon wrote it, he wrote it with the idea it was being given to those people who were already redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. I have come to the conclusion that the book of Ecclesiastes is intended for God's children as an aid to help produce the wisdom necessary to live our lives by faith in this horrible world that we are surrounded by. If we are willing to spend some time on it and be thinking about the principles that are there, it can be a very great help.

Those subjects like I just mentioned—redemption, and the mighty acts of God—are dealt with in other writings, but Ecclesiastes deals with giving the sons of God practical advice regarding living in the world while observing God's way of life, and we want to make as few mistakes as we possibly can, and not waste time. Remember, everything matters. Time matters. It is not that God is rushing us through. This is why death is dealt with in the book of Ecclesiastes, because it is a reality of our world.

Death is a reality, and everybody is going to die, and the Christian needs to take that into consideration in his life, not being all hang-dog about it, just knowing it is a reality. I am 80 years old. I never expected to live to be 80. My male ancestors all died pretty young, so I know God kept me alive, and I owe that to Him, or otherwise I would be dead. I had a heart attack five years ago. That should have killed me maybe, but except for God doing what He did, and so I have outlived my male ancestors. As far as I know, only one has lived longer than me, so I cannot go about bragging that I have been in really good health all these years. I have been in good health, but it is because God gave it to me.

Ecclesiastes deals with giving the sons of God practical advice regarding living in a world while observing God's way of life, and it does this by emphasizing the frustrating, empty, valueless life that the world produces. You see, there is a choice. We can have this, or we can have that of what Solomon is talking about. So what does the book of Ecclesiastes kind of focus on? It is telling us what to *avoid*. The teacher says, "Don't go that way. I've already tried that. It doesn't work. Go *this way*."

Let us go back to Ecclesiastes, chapter one. We have not even gotten to the preface yet. I believe that the first eight verses really are the preface. If you look in your Bible, it is very likely that whenever it was printed they made a very clear division between verse 8 and verse 9—usually a paragraph break at the very least, because the translators and the printers recognized that it is a break in the thought up until that particular time. We

are going to read the first three verses.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-3 The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher; “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?

There in a nutshell is Ecclesiastes' major theme, and it is right at the beginning of the preface. The body of the writing provides many illustrations drawn from the preacher's experiences and his conclusions regarding their poverty of value toward what really matters in life. He concludes that the world and all of its activities, even though it may be entertaining and exciting to human nature and is a source God created to meet our daily needs to be supplied, is overall a gigantic waste of time to a life in which everything matters to some degree.

So why does it look negative to some? Because Solomon, the preacher, when he gets to a conclusion, is essentially saying, “Avoid this.” “Avoid that.” Human nature wants to have fun, and here is Solomon saying that is a waste of time. “What do you mean, Solomon? That's fun!” Well, if Solomon could speak, he would say, “That's a waste of time. I tried it. I'm wiser than you. It's a waste of time. Don't let yourself get involved.” “But it's so much fun! Solomon, you're an old fogey.” That is what they would call him today, but what he is giving is wisdom.

There are three phrases contained in those two verses (actually three verses total) that will be repeated quite a number of times throughout this writing, and their meaning within this book needs to be understood to grasp the most and the best of the message.

1. “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.” (Most of the time he just says, “Vanity of vanities,” or he will say, “All is vanity.”)
2. “What profit has a man from all his labor?”
3. “Under the sun.”

These three provide a foundation for the conclusions that are reached at the end of his illustration and therefore for very much of what follows.

Let us look first at the word “vanity.” We have gone through some of this before, but I

found even more. Vanity is the English word translated from the Hebrew *hebel*. Now here is the weird thing. *Hebel* literally means “breath.” [John breathes out.] Did you all see that? [Laughter!] You did not see what came out of my mouth, did you? See, that tells you something about the word. You cannot even see any value whatever, and that is why it was used here in Ecclesiastes. *Hebel* literally means breath. The English word vanity does not even come close to meaning breath.

You might recall one of man’s illustrations which I gave in one of the previous sermons, and that particular commentator said that *hebel* amounts to the scum left over when a soap bubble bursts. Pretty useless, right? That is getting closer to what *hebel* actually means. *Hebel* describes something truly, painfully, insignificant. It is translated as it is in English bibles because *hebel* is used as a metaphor for something. Listen to this synonym: “something brief.”

On a cold day you leave your house and you breathe out warm air. How long can you see what you breathe out? It is out, and it is gone. That is what vanity means. Useless. It means something brief, unsubstantial. Could you build anything on that breath of air that came out of your mouth? Not on your life! Valueless. Now here we get to something important. All of these things are related to their worth to you being in God’s Kingdom. Anything that is valueless, anything that is *hebel*, anything that is vanity is nothing in terms of God’s Kingdom. It is of no value whatever. You have to think of it that way. This has value, or no value in relation to God’s Kingdom. We will get to the term that covers that in just a minute.

Hebel is used 38 times just in the book of Ecclesiastes, and thus *hebel*, depending upon the context in which it is used as a metaphor, takes on the meaning of many, many English synonyms such as: meaninglessness, futile, empty, temporal, fleeting, absurd, senseless, useless, enigmatic, baffling, and mysterious. It can be used in all of those contexts, and even more, but always it is nothing. Incidentally, it is not used all those ways in the book of Ecclesiastes because the context in which it is used does not always cover the way it *might* be used.

The second of the phrases: God intends that life be profitable. You have to ask the question. If all is vanity, what is to be gained by life in this world? Now “profit” is the English translation of the Hebrew *yitron*. Transliterated it is *yitron*, and this word plays a key role in the remainder of this book even though it only appears nine times as a total. The word *yitron* literally means “left over.” That is what a profit is. It is what you have left over after all the expenses are paid.

After you invest your life in this world as a human being, what is going to be left over for

the Kingdom of God? You can begin to see where this word becomes very important. God wants us to have something left over for the Kingdom of God. That is why the book of Ecclesiastes was written. And if we follow the advice there, then we are going to have built things that are for the Kingdom of God.

Thus, the question underlying all of the teacher's illustrations in conclusion is: Why get involved in this? What profit, what good is going to come from it in the end? Ecclesiastes shows that life is not easy, and that it requires the expending of a great deal of time and energy pursuing goals, and God wants there to be profit in what we pursue. But again, it is to a narrow thing. Can the profit be used in the Kingdom of God? So that fits right together with vanity. You avoid the things that are vanity so that there is profit left over for the Kingdom of God.

The next one is: "Under the sun." It is probably equally important to one's understanding of "vanity of vanities," so please do not underestimate the importance of this phrase to the theme of the book. The sense of this phrase is responsible for many of the conclusions reached by the author. It is translated from two Hebrew words: *tahat hassames*. It appears 22 times in Ecclesiastes, and it is used nowhere else in the Bible. It is a word unique to the book of Ecclesiastes, and that by itself is significant in terms of the purpose of the book.

Now "under the sun" is a literal translation of those two words, but in this book it does not represent merely being physically on earth. Rather, it too is a metaphor for looking at life from a secular point of view. You are looking at it from "under the sun," not from under God, and so the view is limited to the sun, and it goes no higher. Our thoughts have to be over the sun to make profitable use of our time here on earth. So looking at life and its events without a relationship with God is the *tahat hassames*. It is a life under the sun, and it means therefore an unconverted perspective, and if we overlook this, it makes the writing appear as though the writer saw everything in a negative sense. No, he did not. What he saw was a world system as being a potential trap to the Christian way of life. "Do not go that way," is what he is saying, and his is the voice of wisdom.

Thus a summary of the first three verses, and in a larger sense a major theme that we are to understand from each conclusion the teacher reaches throughout the entire book, is that in a life lived apart from God, people gain little or nothing toward the Kingdom of God.

Let us set that brief summary I just gave into today's situation, and I think we can say something like this as to why the book was written. The teacher, the speaker Solomon, is addressing people—us, brethren—who can easily become preoccupied with all sorts

of social and economic issues like the volatility of the economy, the possibility of wealth or its loss, of one's social status, the fragility of life due to accident or disease, and even the ever-present reality of death.

All of these things that I just said are all reality, and they are realities that do not change simply because we wish them to. If God is involved in one's life, they will change, or our attitudes toward them will change as we continue in Christ, growing and overcoming. Thus, in that regard, rightly understood and used, this experience living side-by-side with the world actually helps our continuing preparation for the Kingdom of God. God is, in a sense, forcing us to choose. He is forcing us, coercing us, manipulating us to make a choice to go His way and leave the world behind, and yet we can never get rid of the world. It is a reality.

What are we to make of this? In that regard, rightly understood and of course used, this experience of living side-by-side with the world actually helps our continuing preparation for the Kingdom of God. If it were not a help, God would not have it there. So the teacher, in the whole book, is encouraging us to persevere, with faith in God, despite being surrounded by a great deal of negativity, and even persecution.

I want you to recall the overall conclusion and the counsel given by Solomon as stated in Ecclesiastes 12:13-14. That is easy to remember: 12, 13, 14. I think God had something to do with that so that we would never forget the overall conclusion in the book of Ecclesiastes, which is: "Fear God, and keep His commandments. For this is everyone's duty." Brethren, that is the way we must spend life, despite what is going on in the world, despite all the pain that is out there, despite all the attractive carnal opportunities that it presents to us. We are free to go its way if we make that our choice and waste a lot of our time and energy. Solomon says at the end, "Fear God, and keep His commandments. This is everyone's duty." His advice is clear: God's way is the means to a profit-producing life. His way will produce profit for the most important thing in everybody's life, and that is the Kingdom of God.

That is the way the book ends, but everything in the book that Solomon is evaluating leads us to where he makes his conclusion, and all of this other stuff he is basically telling us, "Don't go that way. I tried it. I thought about it. I meditated on it. It doesn't work." Are we willing to take his advice? This is why I said, at least in my mind, that the book of Ecclesiastes is the most profitable book for a Christian in the entire Old Testament because it was written by somebody who had the position, the power, the wealth, the smarts, the mind—everything—so that he could evaluate these things and pass them on. God prepared him that way to do that for us so that we avoid so much in life that is a trap for everybody else. Do we believe it?

Like I said earlier, Solomon does not go into a great deal of detail. He gives us overviews, like we are looking down on the labyrinth, and he is pointing out, "This is the way to go," but he is not guiding and directing every single step because we have to make those choices, and we make a lot of mistakes, but an awful lot of it can be avoided if we will follow the book. Like I said, it is difficult, and we have to think it through because of the manner in which the book was written. It is one of those books we really have to think about and do some research on it.

For you and me now, the combination of God's involvement through fearing Him—"Fear God"—and obeying Him through making right choices (keeping His commandments) is necessary, because Ecclesiastes shows that the world, as it is, without God's personal involvement in one's life, is not designed to enable true profit to be made. Please understand that. That is what Solomon is telling us all the way through the book. "Don't go this way. There's no profit in it for the Kingdom of God."

If you go that way, a person might have a lot of fun. If you go that way it might be very entertaining. If you go that way, you may make a lot of money, but it is not profitable toward the Kingdom of God, and this is why everything matters.

You see, it matters in life in relation to what God has called us for, and by going His way we are allowing Him to create us in the image that *He* wants us to be created in, so that we have a place in the Kingdom of God. And when we are resurrected, we are going to fit right in, and we will think we have been doing that all our life, and in a way we have. One reason we have been doing it all our life is because we are going to be taking orders from Jesus Christ and those subordinate to Him in the Kingdom of God, and those things will come down and we will have the freedom to act and we will willingly carry on to what God's plans are beyond that period of time, and He will have a team that really works well. Who knows, maybe even Solomon will be there. That is one that remains for us to find out.

The other part of this equation is this (the first part being that God has to be involved in our life): I showed you, primarily using Isaiah 55:1-11, that our job is to seek God, to be like Him; not to find Him, but seek Him to be like Him, to imitate Him, to be in His image or in the image of Jesus Christ, however you might want to put it.

Ecclesiastes 1:4-8 One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever. The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it arose. The wind goes toward the south, and turns around to the north; the wind whirls about continually, and comes again on its circuit. All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not

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full; to the place from which the rivers come, there they return again. All things are full of labor; man cannot express it. The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

This is the first place where he begins to launch out on his discourse there as to why the world is not profitable for the converted. These verses and his conclusion is the first evidence presented that the world, as it is without God—remember, “under the sun”—is not structured to produce true gain. God wants our lives to be profitable, but the world as it is right now is not structured to produce true gain. We will have to define that a little bit more finely.

He first points to the operation of the natural laws as illustration of what life is akin to. So what do we find? Well, life is like a hamster running endlessly, turning a wheel. The wheel is moving, the hamster is moving. The hamster is empowering the wheel, but he is not getting anywhere. “Around and around it goes, and where it stops, nobody knows.” That is what every one of those illustrations he gives there is showing. It is showing that a person who does not have God involved in his life and is not seeking Him to be like Him, their life consists of constant cyclical repetitions of the same operations without end regardless of where and when one lives in the creation.

The way things are now is the way it was a thousand years ago. Life went on. The wind blew toward the south. The wind blew toward the north. The wind blew toward the west. The wind blew toward the east. All the waters ran down off the mountain and into the ocean to be evaporated, fall on the mountain, back to the ocean. Do you see what I mean? Everything in nature is cyclical. In order to give us the feel of wearying—and it is too bad we cannot see this in the Hebrew—Solomon actually says here, “the sun also rises, and the sun goes down and hastens to the place where it arose.” That word “hastens” actually pictures the sun going down, sinking below the horizon gasping for breath, as if the travel from east to west was more than it could stand, and it just made it!

What kind of a picture does that give you about life? It is tiring. It is wearying. Those things are built into the Hebrew, and if we were Hebrew people we could read that and grasp it that way, but I have to teach you because I looked it up, and so I am telling you Solomon is trying to get a point across to us that life is repetitiously wearying, and nothing is produced for the Kingdom of God all by itself.

What does the Christian take out of this? You do not leave God out of the picture—ever! That is the point. He even said, “One generation comes, and another generation goes.” I

said that the way we would say it in English. It does not say it that way in Hebrew. It says, "One generation goes, and another generation comes." It completely reverses it. Do you know why he did that? He wants you and me to get the picture that as soon as you die somebody else is going to take your place. That is what life is about. "Who do you think you are?" That is what Solomon is saying. If you do not have God in your life, that is all you are. You are going to die and somebody else is going to take your place.

Are you beginning to get the point of how valuable this book is? So where is profit? Where is life? How can you live so that everything you do is not vanity? Well, God has to be a part of it. God solved that for us by calling us and revealing Himself so that we have the opportunity to make the choices that are going to add something to life—that is, add something to it so that we are prepared for the Kingdom of God and we have allowed God to shape us into what He wants. We do not really get to God's part until we get to Ecclesiastes 3, and how He shows us He is manipulating things to prepare us. Sometimes you are up, sometimes you are down, but we will get to that a little bit later.

Are you beginning to get the point here? Right off the bat, Solomon starts telling us about life, what life is like whenever God is not part of it. There is no profit to it. You see this piece building as he goes along as to why this works, or that works, or it does not work, but he just does it in broad statements. He does not point us to a great deal of detail unless you are able to get into the Hebrew and then we see a little bit more about what is there. I would say that what he is showing here, especially in all these verses leading up to and including verse 8, that almost everything there is enhancing the brevity of life. That is what it is.

Toward the end of those illustrations he turns his attention to men, and he concludes that people are, in principle, no different than the cyclical operations that I just mentioned, and that from his observation, mankind too appears locked into constant repetition of similar cyclical patterns. There are reasons for this. I am going to give you a few reasons as to why amongst men who have lived at any time there are constants in all cultures that must be taken into consideration that shape our lives. We are born into it, and the only way to really break through and be free from it is for God to call a person, and we begin to respond.

One of these constants is Satan. He is something we have to deal with, and we know his general character. He is God's enemy. He is our enemy, and he does not change in terms of the overall thrust of everything he does. It is to destroy—to destroy God, destroy God's way, destroy man, destroy the earth, so he passes these concepts on to one generation after another, and mankind is helpless unless God intervenes. Now God has done that, so that is something we have to take into consideration. Satan is alive

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and well just as he was when God formed Adam and Eve. The first thing he did was try to destroy Adam and Eve as soon as he was given the opportunity. In a sense you might say he did, because he got them to sin. But the story is not over yet, because God has uses for those things.

Another constant is human nature. This is of course largely dependent upon Satan and his manipulations, and mankind keeps responding in essentially the same way all the time. So one generation comes, and another generation goes. Peoples' names change. Their language changes, but the actions are almost always the same, and so man is caught in this same cyclical operation as the rest of nature, and these people are going on in natural ways, but unless God intervenes and interrupts the cycle and gives the people the opportunity to make the choices His way, it is going to keep on continuing, and those people go into their graves.

Ecclesiastes 1:9-10 That which has been is what will be, that which is done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which it may be said, "See, this is new"? It has already been in ancient times before us.

Because there are these constants amongst living creatures—the primary ones of which are Satan and us, Satan having impact on us—and he even goes on to say in verse 11:

Ecclesiastes 1:11 There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of things to come by those who will come after.

Solomon laments a little bit later in the next chapter, "I might just leave all that I have built to somebody who didn't do a thing to help me produce this, and who knows whether he's going to use it wisely, or he's just going to waste it." That frustrated him because he put a lot of effort into that and he did not want to see it go to waste, but he knew—pretty sure—that it would, that his sons were not really quite like him, and that they would be wasted.

There is one thing I do want to get to before we close off here, because all we see is futile repetition, and so we have to ask the question: Is all this activity worth it?

We are going to go back to the New Testament to Romans 8, and we are going to see that God *willed* that it be this way, and therefore even though it looks on the surface as though it is tremendously frustrating and confusing, that God is the One who organized

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it this way, and therefore it is good. It is actually an act of love. God does everything in love.

Romans 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

Remember, I said earlier Christianity is a religion that is constantly looking ahead.

Romans 8:19-20 For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly. . .

In other words, it is not that nature was willing for this, but the Creator *imposed* this on His creation

Romans 8:20-22 . . . but because of Him who subjected it in hope [that is, the hope that it would produce a profit towards His Kingdom for all who are going to be in that Kingdom]; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.

Let us summarize it. God the Creator has willed that things must be as they are for the very best working of His purposes. He has willed that we must live and operate in the midst of what sin, vanity, and futility create, and the point is pretty clear.

The point for the overwhelming majority of people is this: People gain nothing from all their work apart from God. Incidentally, the Greek word underlying “futility” as it appears here in the NKJ, or “vanity,” as it says in the KJV in Romans 8 is *mataiotes*. It is the Greek synonym for the Hebrew *hebel*, and it too stresses emptiness, briefness, unsubstantial, and impermanent as we might say about life, that life is just like spinning our wheels, and that sums it up for today. The only way we do not go through life spinning our wheels is that God is part of our life, and we allowed Him to be part of it. Then He will create us in His image and He will produce the profit through us.